



CHAPTER I

OUR COTTAGE HOME

My early days were all spent in the beautiful county of Dumfries, which Scotch folks call the Queen of the South. There, in a small cottage, on the farm of Braehead, in the parish of Kirkmahoe, I was born on the 24th May 1824. My father, James Paton, was a stocking manufacturer in a small way; and he and his young wife, Janet Jardine Rogerson, lived on terms of warm personal friendship with the "gentleman farmer," so they gave me his son's name, John *Gibson*; and the curly-haired child of the cottage was soon able to toddle across to the mansion, and became a great pet of the lady there. On my visit to Scotland in 1884 I drove out to Braehead; but we found no cottage, nor trace of a cottage, and amused ourselves by supposing that we could discover by the rising of the grassy mound, the outline where the foundations once had been!

While yet a mere child, five years or so of age, my parents took me to a new home in the ancient village of Torthorwald, about four and a quarter miles from Dumfries, on the road to Lockerbie. At that time, say 1830, Torthorwald was a busy and thriving village, and comparatively populous, with its cottars and crofters, large farmers and small farmers, weavers and shoemakers, cloggers and coopers, blacksmiths and tailors. Fifty-five years later, when I visited the scenes of my youth, the village proper was extinct, except for five thatched cottages where the lingering patriarchs were permitted to die slowly away,—soon they too would be swept into the large farms, and their garden plots ploughed over, like sixty or seventy others that had been blotted out!

From the Bank Hill, close above our village, and accessible in a walk of fifteen minutes, a view opens to the eye which, despite several easily understood prejudices of mine that may discount any opinion that I offer, still appears to me well worth seeing amongst all the beauties of Scotland. At your feet lay a thriving village, every cottage sitting in its own plot of garden, and sending up its blue cloud of "peat reek," which never somehow seemed to pollute the blessed air; and after all has been said or sung, a beautifully situated village of healthy and happy homes for God's children is surely the finest feature in every landscape! Looking from the Bank Hill on a summer day, Dumfries with its spires shone so conspicuous that you could have believed it not more than two miles away; the splendid sweeping vale through which Nith rolls to Solway, lay all before the naked eye, beautiful with village spires, mansion houses, and white shining farms; the Galloway hills, gloomy and far-tumbling, bounded the forward view, while to the left rose Criffel, cloud-capped and majestic; then the white sands of Solway, with tides swifter than horsemen; and finally the eye rested joyfully upon the hills of Cumberland, and noticed with glee the blue curling smoke from its villages on the southern Solway shores.

There, amid this wholesome and breezy village life, our dear parents found their home for the long period of forty years. There too were born to them eight additional children, making in all a family of five sons and six daughters. Theirs was the first of the thatched cottages on the left, past the "miller's house," going up the "village gate," with a small garden in front of it, and a large garden across the road; and it is one of the few still lingering to show to a new generation what the homes of their fathers were. The architect who planned that cottage had no ideas of art, but a fine eye for durability! It consists at present of three, but originally of four, pairs of "oak couples" (Scotticé *kipples*), planted like solid trees in the ground at equal intervals, and gently sloped inwards till they meet or are "coupled" at the ridge, this coupling being managed not by rusty iron, but by great solid pins of oak. A roof of oaken wattles was laid across these, till within eleven or twelve feet of the ground, and from the ground upwards a stone wall was raised, as perpendicular as was found practicable, towards these overhanging wattles, this



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wall being roughly "pointed" with sand and clay and lime. Now into and upon the roof was woven and intertwined a covering of thatch, that defied all winds and weathers, and that made the cottage marvellously cosy,—being renewed year by year, and never allowed to remain in disrepair at any season. But the beauty of the construction was and is its durability, or rather the permanence of its oaken ribs! There they stand, after probably not less than four centuries, japanned with "peat reek" till they are literally shining, so hard that no ordinary nail can be driven into them, and perfectly capable of service for four centuries more on the same conditions. The walls are quite modern, having all been rebuilt in my father's time, except only the few great foundation boulders, piled around the oaken couples; and parts of the roofing also may plead guilty to having found its way thither only in recent days; but the architect's one idea survives, baffling time and change—the ribs and rafters of oak.

Our home consisted of a "but" and a "ben" and a "mid room," or chamber, called the "closet." The one end was my mother's domain, and served all the purposes of dining-room and kitchen and parlour, besides containing two large wooden erections, called by our Scotch peasantry "box-beds"; not holes in the wall, as in cities, but grand, big, airy beds, adorned with many-coloured counterpanes, and hung with natty curtains, showing the skill of the mistress of the house. The other end was my father's workshop, filled with five or six "stocking frames," whirring with the constant action of five or six pairs of busy hands and feet, and producing right genuine hosiery for the merchants at Hawick and Dumfries. The "closet" was a very small apartment betwixt the other two, having room only for a bed, a little table, and a chair, with a diminutive window shedding diminutive light on the scene. This was the Sanctuary of that cottage home. Thither daily, and oftentimes a day, generally after each meal, we saw our father retire, and "shut to the door"; and we children got to understand by a sort of spiritual instinct (for the thing was too sacred to be talked about) that prayers were being poured out there for us, as of old by the High Priest within the veil in the Most Holy Place. We occasionally heard the pathetic echoes of a

trembling voice pleading as if for life, and we learned to slip out and in past that door on tiptoe, not to disturb the holy colloquy. The outside world might not know, but we knew, whence came that happy light as of a new-born smile that always was dawning on my father's face: it was a reflection from the Divine Presence, in the consciousness of which he lived. Never, in temple or cathedral, on mountain or in glen, can I hope to feel that the Lord God is more near, more visibly walking and talking with men, than under that humble cottage roof of thatch and oaken wattles. Though everything else in religion were by some unthinkable catastrophe to be swept out of memory, or blotted from my understanding, my soul would wander back to those early scenes, and shut itself up once again in that Sanctuary Closet, and, hearing still the echoes of those cries to God, would hurl back all doubt with the victorious appeal, "He walked with God, why may not I?"

CHAPTER II

OUR FOREBEARS

A FEW notes had better here be given as to our "Forebears," the kind of stock from which my father and mother sprang. My father's mother, Janet Murray, claimed to be descended from a Galloway family that fought and suffered for Christ's Crown and Covenant in Scotland's "killing time," and was herself a woman of a pronouncedly religious development. Her husband, our grandfather, William Paton, had passed through a roving and romantic career, before he settled down to be a douce deacon of the weavers of Dumfries, like his father before him.

Forced by a press-gang to serve on board a British man-of-war, he was taken prisoner by the French, and thereafter placed under Paul Jones, the pirate of the seas, and bore to his dying day the mark of a slash from the captain's sword across his shoulder for some slight disrespect or offence. Determining with two others to escape, the three were hotly pursued by Paul Jones's men. One, who could swim but little, was shot,

and had to be cut adrift by the other two, who in the darkness swam into a cave and managed to evade for two nights and a day the rage of their pursuers. My grandfather, being young and gentle and yellow-haired, persuaded some kind heart to rig him out in female attire, and in this costume escaped the attentions of the press-gang more than once; till, after many hardships, he bargained with the captain of a coal sloop to stow him away amongst his black diamonds; and thus, in due time, he found his way home to Dumfries, where he tackled bravely and wisely the duties of husband, father, and citizen for the remainder of his days. The smack of the sea about the stories of his youth gave zest to the talks round their quiet fireside, and that, again, was seasoned by the warm Evangelical spirit of his Covenanting wife, her lips "dropping grace."

On the other side, my mother, Janet Rogerson, had for parents a father and mother of the Annandale stock. William Rogerson, her father, was one of many brothers, all men of uncommon strength and great force of character, quite worthy of the Border Rievers of an earlier day. Indeed, it was in some such way that he secured his wife, though the dear old lady in after-days was chary about telling the story. She was a girl of good position, the ward of two unscrupulous uncles who had charge of her small estate, near Langholm; and while attending some boarding school she fell devotedly in love with the tall, fair-haired, gallant young blacksmith, William Rogerson. Her guardians, doubtless very properly, objected to the "connection"; but our young Lochinvar, with his six or seven stalwart brothers and other trusty "lads," all mounted, and with some ready tool in case of need, went boldly and claimed his bride, and she, willingly mounting at his side, was borne off in the light of open day, joyously married, and took possession of her "but and ben," as the mistress of the blacksmith's castle.

Janet Jardine bowed her neck to the self-chosen yoke, with the light of a supreme affection in her heart, and showed in her gentler ways, her love of books, her fine accomplishments with the needle, and her general air of ladyhood, that her lot had once been cast in easier, but not necessarily happier, ways. Her blacksmith lover proved not unworthy of his lady bride, and in old age found for her a quiet and modest home, the fruit of years of toil and hopeful thrift, their own little property,

in which they rested and waited a happy end. Amongst those who at last wept by her grave stood, amidst many sons and daughters, her son the Rev. James J. Rogerson, clergyman of the Church of England, who, for many years thereafter, and till quite recently, was spared to occupy a distinguished position at ancient Shrewsbury, and has left behind him there an honoured and beloved name.

From such a home came our mother, Janet Jardine Rogerson, a bright-hearted, high-spirited, patient-toiling, and altogether heroic little woman; who, for about forty-three years, made and kept such a wholesome, independent, God-fearing, and self-reliant life for her family of five sons and six daughters, as constrains me, when I look back on it now, in the light of all I have since seen and known of others far differently situated, almost to worship her memory. She had gone with her high spirits and breezy disposition to gladden, as their companion, the quiet abode of some grand or great-grand-uncle and aunt, familiarly named in all that Dalswinton neighbourhood, "Old Adam and Eve." Their house was on the outskirts of the moor, and life for the young girl there had not probably too much excitement. But one thing had arrested her attention. She had noticed that a young stocking-maker from the "Brig End," James Paton, the son of William and Janet there, was in the habit of stealing alone into the quiet wood, book in hand, day after day, at certain hours, as if for private study and meditation. It was a very excusable curiosity that led the young bright heart of the girl to watch him devoutly reading and hear him reverently reciting (though she knew not then, it was Ralph Erskine's *Gospel Sonnets*, which he could say by heart sixty years afterwards, as he lay on his bed of death); and finally that curiosity awed itself into a holy respect, when she saw him lay aside his broad Scotch bonnet, kneel down under the sheltering wings of some tree, and pour out all his soul in daily prayers to God. As yet they had never spoken. What spirit moved her, let lovers tell—was it all devotion, or was it a touch of unconscious love kindling in her towards the yellow-haired and thoughtful youth? Or was there a stroke of mischief, of that teasing, which so often opens up the door to the most serious step in all our lives? Anyhow, one day she slipped in quietly, stole away his bonnet, and hung it on a branch near by, while his trance of devotion made him oblivious

of all around; then, from a safe retreat, she watched and enjoyed his perplexity in seeking for and finding it! A second day this was repeated; but his manifest disturbance of mind, and his long pondering with the bonnet in hand, as if almost alarmed, seemed to touch another chord in her heart—that chord of pity which is so often the prelude of love, that finer pity that grieves to wound anything nobler or tenderer than ourselves. Next day, when he came to his accustomed place of prayer, a little card was pinned against the tree just where he knelt, and on it these words:—

"She who stole away your bonnet is ashamed of what she did; she has a great respect for you, and asks you to pray for her, that she may become as good a Christian as you."

Staring long at that writing, he forgot Ralph Erskine for one day! Taking down the card, and wondering who the writer could be, he was abusing himself for his stupidity in not suspecting that some one had discovered his retreat and removed his bonnet, instead of wondering whether angels had been there during his prayer,—when, suddenly raising his eyes, he saw in front of old Adam's cottage, through a lane amongst the trees, the passing of another kind of angel, swinging a milk-pail in her hand and merrily singing some snatch of old Scottish song. He knew, in that moment, by a Divine instinct, as infallible as any voice that ever came to seer of old, that she was the angel visitor that had stolen in upon his retreat—that bright-faced, clever-witted niece of old Adam and Eve, to whom he had never yet spoken, but whose praises he had often heard said and sung—"Wee Jen." I am afraid he did pray "for her," in more senses than one, that afternoon; at any rate, more than a Scotch bonnet was very effectually stolen; a good heart and true was there virtually bestowed, and the trust was never regretted on either side, and never betrayed.

Often and often, in the genial and beautiful hours of the autumntide of their long life, have I heard my dear father tease "Jen" about her maidenly intentions in the stealing of that bonnet; and often have heard her quick mother-wit in the happy retort, that had his motives for coming to that retreat been altogether and exclusively pious, he would probably have found his way to the other side of the wood, but that men who prowled about the Garden of Eden ran the risk of meeting some day with a daughter of Eve!

CHAPTER III.

CONSECRATED PARENTS

SOMEWHERE in or about his seventeenth year, my father passed through a crisis of religious experience; and from that day he openly and very decidedly followed the Lord Jesus. His parents had belonged to one of the older branches of what is now called the United Presbyterian Church; but my father, having made an independent study of the Scotch Worthies, the Cloud of Witnesses, the Testimonies, and the Confession of Faith, resolved to cast in his lot with the oldest of all the Scotch Churches, the Reformed Presbyterian, as most nearly representing the Covenants and the attainments of both the first and second Reformations in Scotland. This choice he deliberately made, and sincerely and intelligently adhered to; and was able at all times to give strong and clear reasons from Bible and from history for the principles he upheld.

Besides this, there was one other mark and fruit of his early religious decision, which looks even fairer through all these years. Family Worship had heretofore been held only on Sabbath Day in his father's house; but the young Christian, entering into conference with his sympathising mother, managed to get the household persuaded that there ought to be daily morning and evening prayer and reading of the Bible and holy singing. This the more readily, as he himself agreed to take part regularly in the same, and so relieve the old warrior of what might have proved for him too arduous spiritual toils! And so began in his seventeenth year that blessed custom of Family Prayer, morning and evening, which my father practised probably without one single avoidable omission till he lay on his deathbed, seventy-seven years of age; when, even to the last day of his life, a portion of Scripture was read, and his voice was heard softly joining in the Psalm, and his lips breathed the morning and evening Prayer,—falling in sweet benediction on the heads of all his children, far away many of them over all the earth, but all meeting him there at the Throne of Grace.

Our place of worship was the Reformed Presbyterian Church at Dumfries, under the ministry, during most of these

days, of Rev. John McDermid—a genuine, solemn, lovable Covenanter, who cherished towards my father a warm respect, that deepened into apostolic affection when the yellow hair turned snow-white and both of them grew patriarchal in their years. The Minister, indeed, was translated to a Glasgow charge; but that rather exalted than suspended their mutual love. Dumfries was four miles fully from our Torthorwald home; but the tradition is that during all these forty years my father was only thrice prevented from attending the worship of God—once by snow, so deep that he was baffled and had to return; once by ice on the road, so dangerous that he was forced to crawl back up the Roucan Brae on his hands and knees, after having descended it so far with many falls; and once by the terrible outbreak of cholera at Dumfries.

Each of us, from very early days, considered it no penalty, but a great joy, to go with our father to the church; the four miles were a treat to our young spirits, the company by the way was a fresh incitement, and occasionally some of the wonders of city-life rewarded our eager eyes. A few other pious men and women, of the best Evangelical type, went from the same parish to one or other favourite Minister at Dumfries; and when these God-fearing peasants "forgathered" in the way to or from the House of God, we youngsters had sometimes rare glimpses of what Christian talk may be and ought to be.

We had, too, special Bible Readings on the Lord's Day evening,—mother and children and visitors reading in turns, with fresh and interesting question, answer, and exposition, all tending to impress us with the infinite grace of a God of love and mercy in the great gift of His dear Son Jesus, our Saviour. The Shorter Catechism was gone through regularly, each answering the question asked, till the whole had been explained, and its foundation in Scripture shown by the proof-texts adduced. It has been an amazing thing to me, occasionally to meet with men who blamed this "catechising" for giving them a distaste to religion; every one in all our circle thinks and feels exactly the opposite. It laid the solid rock-foundations of our religious life. After-years have given to these questions and their answers a deeper or a modified meaning, but none of us have ever once even dreamed of

wishing that we had been otherwise trained. Of course, if the parents are not devout, sincere, and affectionate,—if the whole affair on both sides is taskwork, or worse, hypocritical and false,—results must be very different indeed!

Oh, I can remember those happy Sabbath evenings; no blinds down, and shutters up, to keep out the sun from us, as some scandalously affirm; but a holy, happy, entirely human day, for a Christian father, mother, and children to spend. Others must write and say what they will, and as they feel; but so must I. There were eleven of us brought up in a home like that; and never one of the eleven, boy or girl, man or woman, has been heard, or ever will be heard, saying that Sabbath was dull and wearisome for us, or suggesting that we have heard of or seen any way more likely than that for making the Day of the Lord bright and blessed alike for parents and for children. But God help the homes where these things are done by force and not by love!

As I must, however, leave the story of my father's life—much more worthy, in many ways, of being written than my own—I may here mention that his long and upright life made him a great favourite in all religious circles far and near within the neighbourhood, that at sick-beds and at funerals he was constantly sent for and much appreciated, and that this appreciation greatly increased, instead of diminishing, when years whitened his long, flowing locks, and gave him an apostolic beauty; till finally, for the last twelve years or so of his life, he became by appointment a sort of Rural Missionary for the four nearest parishes, and spent his autumn in literally sowing the good seed of the Kingdom as a Colporteur of the Tract and Book Society of Scotland. His success in this work, for a rural locality, was beyond all belief. Within a radius of five miles he was known in every home, welcomed by the children, respected by the servants, longed for eagerly by the sick and aged. He gloried in showing off the beautiful Bibles and other precious books, which he sold in amazing numbers. He sang sweet Psalms beside the sick, and prayed like the voice of God at their dying beds. He went cheerily from farm to farm, from cot to cot; and when he wearied on the moorland roads, he refreshed his soul by reciting aloud one of Ralph Erskine's "Sonnets," or crooning to the birds one of David's Psalms. His happy partner, our



TORTHORWALD CASTLE.

beloved mother, died in 1865, and he himself in 1868, having reached his seventy-seventh year, an altogether beautiful and noble episode of human existence having been enacted, amid the humblest surroundings of a Scottish peasant's home, through the influence of their united love by the grace of God; and in this world, or in any world, all their children will rise up at mention of their names and call them blessed!

CHAPTER IV

SCHOOL DAYS

IN my boyhood, Torthorwald had one of the grand old typical Parish Schools of Scotland; where the rich and the poor met together in perfect equality; where Bible and Catechism were taught as zealously as grammar and geography; and where capable lads from the humblest of cottages were prepared in Latin and Mathematics and Greek to go straight from their Village class to the University bench. Besides, at that time, an accomplished pedagogue of the name of Smith, a learned man of more than local fame, had added a Boarding House to the ordinary School, and had attracted some of the better class gentlemen and farmers' sons from the surrounding country; so that Torthorwald, under his *régime*, reached the zenith of its educational fame. In this School I was initiated into the mystery of letters, and all my brothers and sisters after me, though some of them under other masters than mine. My teacher punished severely—rather, I should say, savagely—especially for lessons badly prepared. Yet, that he was in some respects kindly and tender-hearted, I had the best of reasons to know.

When still under twelve years of age, I started to learn my father's trade, in which I made surprising progress. We wrought from six in the morning till ten at night, with an hour at dinner-time and half an hour at breakfast and again at supper. These spare moments every day I devoutly spent on my books, chiefly in the rudiments of Latin and Greek; for I had given my soul to God, and was resolved to aim at being a Missionary of the Cross, or a Minister of the Gospel.